

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: John Isle

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's the 24th November 2006 and I'm talking this morning to Mr John Isle. Good morning.

Good morning.

Now we've fed the geese who've been knocking on the door for their breakfast! I wonder if you could just describe to me where we are please.

Well we're in the north end of Crowle, not far away from Scunthorpe, nine miles from Scunthorpe. I have land adjoining the moors, I farm roughly about seventy acres that abuts the moors plus a little bit of moors land that goes into the moors. The land is.. Go on.

No, go on.

The land is predominantly warp land, running to black as it meets the moor edges and the land that we own on the moors is just turf moors that has been cut over once.

When you say it's running to black what do you mean?

Well it's a mixture of warp and black peat, mixed up like.

What do they call the farm?

North End Farm.

North End Farm, and have you always lived in Crowle?

I've allus lived in Crowle yes, generations before me have lived in Crowle.

And have they lived here?

They've lived here and at the old farmhouse next door, yes. What we call Slack Farm.

Right, so you come from generations of Crowle farmers.

Yes, Crowle farmers, that's right.

Okay, and have you got brothers and sisters?

No, no I'm the last of the line.

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Now you said to me that your farm has, not only abuts onto the moor but actually has a part of the moor?

Belonging it yes, belonging to one of big fields yes.

What do you, what do you grow, what do you grow in the farm as a whole?

We grow wheat, we've grown sugar beat, but we've relinquished with sugar beat tonnage this time, we grow winter barley and spring barley for malting and potatoes and carrots. And we do some meadows, old established meadows for hay like.

Have you got livestock?

We've no livestock only a few chickens and geese as you've heard.

So what do you do with your hay?

Some we use, we've a mare and foal at back o' yard and some I sell.

So you've lived here, as you say, all your life. Some people who live in the area, even though they've lived in the area all their lives, they don't really know much about the moors.

No.

Did you, were you aware of it from being very young?

Well we was wi' going to work on t'land wi' mi' father when we was children, it was a natural attraction to go and have a look beyond our own boundaries, sort of thing and we used to go and go to t'moors men when they was working up there like and that's how we come to be acquainted wi' t'moors.

And can you tell me what it was like then?

There was hardly any vegetation on it at all. It used to grow a yearly crop of bracken which they used to either mow and carry off where they wanted to do the following year's cutting or they would have a controlled burn of about fifty acres. Mowed big wide strips so t'flames couldn't cross it and then on a suitable day and wind direction they would burn it off. And there was hardly any silver birch trees, there was no heather, only in very low boggy areas and it was not very thick at all. But since this encroachment of birch its snubbed a lot of the bracken and vegetation that used to grow in cleared area have gone like, its, they've disappeared.

When you say there wasn't much vegetation was that because it had been cleared off?

No, that big fire that went across it in fifty six seemed to fire all this birch growth up after it burnt all the bracken vegetation off it, this birch seemed to come from then.

Can you tell me about this fire?

Well, it just, I don't know just where it started, it swept across all Crowle Moors and they evacuated houses and one thing or another for safety but it didn't get into t'houses, they kept it off did t'fire brigades, but it got under all t'tram ways and burnt sleepers and distorted all t'trams so they

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couldn't run any trucks on 'em and that was the finish. There were a lot o' peat stacks left on t'moors and they're still on like, in what they call the church piece. Still a lot of stacks still left.

Do you remember that fire?

I can remember t'fire yeah, it were smoked out here in this yard when t'wind was over to west, it was all across Crowle and it, we'd to stop harvesting or whatever we was doing up here, cause you couldn't see for smoke and red hot ash blowing about like.

And how long did it burn for?

It burnt for quite a number o' weeks. Fiercely it burnt for a few days, but, on t'top vegetation, but it got into pockets and got under t'peat and it got under our land, we lead a lot o' soil into t'holes that it had burnt under t'farm land to fill it in like and, and that.

How old were you then?

I would only be six or seven year old, wunt I. No, a bit older. Yeah, nine year old.

And you say it burnt underneath the fields.

It got underneath into t'peat yeah.

And it burnt underneath your...

It burnt underneath and let t'top drop in like, drop, soil drop in and when it had finished burning we led soil in from off hill tops and such like to build these low depressions that had been afire.

And did you have any losses then from that?

No we didn't have any losses, I don't think, I don't think there was any crops burnt, we didn't anyway, but I can't remember whether anybody else did or not. But I think our piece at t'top next to t'moors, I think it was potatoes at that time and it dropped summer draws down like, you know. So we'd to watch it when we took 'em up I expect, I can't remember that.

And did you used to, did you go and used to play on the moors?

Well we di'nt used to go and play on we used to just go for a look and sort of, like, like, when t'men was up there or go for a walk as we got older. We used to go for a walk wi' t'dogs on and that, and later we used to go shooting on like, when we got older, you know, go across it that way like. Probably shunt a done any road!

[Laughter]

Did you feel that you couldn't go on there?

No not really no. We used to go on our own bit o' moors like and then sort of spread off from there. And there used to be fire watchers in the summer time when, when, it was the burning season sort of thing when everything was tinder dry, they used to do a fire watch, seven days a week. But in a winter time there was nobody on it, not on Crowle side anyway.

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Who used to do the fire watch?

Chap called George Ray and Albert Ashley and some Kemptons from, that used to live at Medge Hall.

And it, was it organised by the..

British Moss, then and then Fisons kept 'em on, still doing it after Fisons, did Fisons take over in sixty three, I think it was?

Did you see them cutting peat then?

I never actually remember them hand cutting it. I can remember 'em leading stacks off, but I can't actually remember any graving being done, any cutting like, no. I can remember t'machines cutting on Thorne side when they used to go across in them early Dutch and German machines, I can remember seeing them working like. But, no, I can't remember any handwork being done, not removing peat that way.

And you say you remember them leading it off, tell me about that.

I can remember 'em, ponies up there on t'lines before there was burnt, yeah, they'd be leading stacks off.

Can you tell me what that was, describe that a bit?

Well they used to pull four or five tubs, trucks, we used to call 'em tubs. One pony or if they was pulling more than that they would put two on, one at front of other like and then come round and go over t'Pony Bridge and to Swinefleet Mill. That's how they used to do it like.

And they went to Swinefleet?

They went to Swinefleet, but they could have took some across the low end of the moors and past the Yorkshire Triangle area and, come out onto Medge Hall tram line like, it was all linked up. So, well I can remember 'em coming our way like.

And you said there'd be five, about five, up to five tubs for one horse?

Yeah, summat like, they're not very big 'uns, they war'nt these big trucks like, they were only little things like, but yeah I can remember 'em pulling 'em, yeah.

And these were the tubs that were on, on the rails were they?

Yeah, just little things wi' sides on and little, or if, there was some bigger 'uns but I expect they maybe only pulled one to a horse then, I don't know, that was more on Thorne side.

Were they still using horses then on Thorne side?

They used 'em, they had a engine di'nt they, used to run t'engine I think whenever they could on Thorne side and maybe bring 'em on, arteries that ran to t'main tram line, with ponies like, I don't know, cause I never went onto Thorne side, not then, like, them days. But, when they finished on

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Crowle side I expect they would take t'ponies and that and take 'em to other side I expect, like. I don't know.

And were they familiar these horse then, or, did you know, did you get to know them or?

No I dint get to know any of 'em, they just used to stand there while, you know, these tubs was filled and they was well looked after and everything like, as I can remember anyway, and then t'engine took over. I don't know whether they ever run t'engine on this side or not, I think they maybe tried it but lines warn't, lines wasn't strong enough. They're only a very light gauge. But I, I don't remember it.

A lot of the peat workers were Dutch, did you know...

No I dint know any of Dutch at all. There was Duffields and Amaries and, mainly at this side, that I can remember. Some of 'em were seasonal workers, if there was frosty weather and they couldn't go onto t'moors to grave, or it were too wet they used to come for jobs on t'farms following t'thrashing machine. Wherever t'machine went to thresh stacks of corn, either for us or anybody else in Crowle, they would go see if there was a job, cause there was no dole or anything like it in them days, and if they had families they had to find work to do. That's what used to happen like.

And was it just men?

The wives used to go later, men used to go early, and then the wives would go to carry and stack up, or wall, or whatever like. But I don't know whether they, I don't remember women on Crowle Moors, but I can remember they used to bike down t'tram lines to go over t'warpin drain and they used paddens and the wives used to go with 'em to, to wall or to stack or whatever like, or to carry off, and one thing or another.

And that would presumably be seasonal work? Particularly stacking and what-not.

Stacking up, yeah, they used to stack, get it stacked up when it were dry and then it sort of used to be, they'd stack maybe a twelve months depending on what, how it, what condition it was in when it was dug out. If it was dug out fairly dry it would soon lead to t'mill and crush like but if it was stacked wet it had to stop, sort of, through a good summer and then lead it off and get it for winter time like.

Did these, did these people, these casual workers and particularly seasonal workers, you said that some of 'em came round looking for work in the, in the farm.

Yeah.

Was it, was it the same group of people who did things like pea pulling and potato picking and that.

No they wun't have knocked off o' t'peat, for pea pulling if the moors, like, cause it'd be decent weather then wun't it coming June and July, they would be working on t'moors like. They was all on piece work, they'd do so much, so many chains, more they did more they earned, both in digging or stacking up or walling or whatever, it was all on piece work. So there really wasn't maybe full time employed, if there was no work, or they couldn't work they just would tell 'em there was nowt doing and they would have to look for something else like. They'd have to do anything I expect. Coal, well some went onto coal, carrying coal and that, for coal merchants.

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Can you tell me when it would be that the people would go potato picking, what time of year would it be?

It's October, last week in September, October. But t'moors men didn't come potato picking, maybe some of their wives did if they wasn't wanted on t'moors, but t'moors men didn't do that. They used to, if they was frozen out or wetted out on moors they used to come following t'threshing machine, to see if they could get a job and if there was too many some would have a job one day at one place, and then they would stand down and let their mates go the following day, like that, while they all sort of, got a turn.

Oh, right, that's very...

That's how they used to do it.

Organised.

Yeah. Well t'threshing machine was going everyday somewhere like, want it? I mean there was no combines in them days much and you often had a job to muster enough staff just through your, with your own employees, so you had to look for outside help like.

And did you have people helping out here?

Oh yeah, mi' father used to do yeah. They used to come and work here like, yeah. Then go back on t'moors. Simon Hall, not Simon Hall, anyway they called him Hall, and Ben Holt, he used to go and work on t'moors, Crawshaws, they used to work on t'moors, piece work and then come onto farms when they couldn't work like. Tomlinson, family Tomlinson, aye.

So did this employ quite a few people in Crowle then?

Oh yes, it was a hive of industry like. British Moss was t'biggest employer and they took all t'other little mills that was working on t'fringes o' t'moors, nearly took all them, bought all their moors of 'em and sort of finished, they finished like, instead of bringing peat to t'light railway, at Eastoft Road here, they used to take it to their own mills then like. Cause they all had little mills, crude mills rigged up, on t'moor edges here for making their own peat like, milling their own peat. Some of it, some of 'em drove, with engines, drove with engines, or they used to put a tractor with a belt put to 'em, crush 'em like, crush 'em like that.

How is it that you have a piece of moor then in your farm? How did it come to happen that you have a piece of moorland in your farm?

Well I think it's, relates from us having land up there, nearly everybody that had land that abutted the moors had a strip o' moors belonging it sort of thing. And some were sold off, some were leased for British Moss to, to cut over, you know and some, they dint let 'em go on it at all like. There's an odd piece or two, still the original height of what the moors was like, that they haven't been touched.

How much higher than the rest is that?

Maybe four foot, maybe. Vegetation's grown on both what was cut and what hasn't been cut, you know, maybe levelling themselves up a bit, I don't know really.

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And how does your piece of moor fit into, why would, I mean why would you have been given a piece of moorland?

Well, in, in the Award, Enclosure Award, nearly everybody that had land down Longin Lane has all had a strip of moors belonging 'em that was awarded land on Longin Lane or Rainsburt Road, they was all awarded some turf moors like.

And this was, for the peat on it?

I don't think they were, well I don't know, I don't think they would let 'em grave peat at one time. Not while, they couldn't take any peat off before t'Enclosure Act and then we used to get turfs to burn on this copper fire when we used to do, had t'copper fire going across yard there, but where they used to come from really I don't know really, I can't remember.

And how does that piece of land fit into the rest of the farm?

We don't do anything with it at all. We've had it linked up with English Nature, under these WES schemes and we've done sort of, bit, well silver birch clearance and scrub clearance and that sort of work on it like. But, it, it is a quite a unique piece of moors. There's a lot of vegetation that's really, with it being a low wet area there's a lot of sort of bog plants and that, that's really got well established. Bog Rosemary, Cranberry, and Sun Dew and all such as that, and this sphagnum mosses, that's growing across it like. When it was all open water, at one time, and there's hardly any open water on it at all now, it's all sort of knitted together with this sphagnum moss, sort of recreating a new peat, I would say, in t'bottom layers underneath.

Now do you have an interest in, sort of the nature and the conservation side, or is it, are you looking at it just primarily from a farm point of view?

No, we've been interested in making something of it. It's been wild and, for a lot of years and we've maybe been working on it eighteen years or something like that to try to improve it. But it is a continual battle against it cause it just tries to revert itself back to a grown up, you know, bog like, wi' trees and bracken and, we've done spraying programmes on it to try to snub this birch and also bracken. At one time I thought I was winning but this time we've had to bush hog it! It was six or seven foot high.

So what's your intention to do with this in the long term?

I should like to keep it interesting and, there's not much we can do with the wet area, not mechanically, it all has to be done with hand. But there is a drier area where you can get in and we do trimming and thinning and we've left a, an old established wood of about four acres. We take up some hay in bad spells and feed little roe deer, but we've got a big population of red deer, which is causing us quite a problem on the farm with laying in crops, walking through t'crops and eating potatoes and sugar beat crops, causing quite a lot of damage. But nobody seems to want to know, [inaudible]. So they're still their multiplying.

Do you know are they, are they natural, are they well established, have they been here a long time?

No they're imports they've, they've come onto t'moors from different sources of escapement and. The first I saw was a red deer stag at the back end of nineteen sixty six and he were very tame, you could go to him, as though, and he wanted to come to you as though you was going to feed him. We had some potatoes at the top bordering the moors and he used to come and pick potatoes up

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that, after we'd drilled it wi' wheat there was a few potatoes left and he used to come and graze these potatoes up. And then he disappeared, some said he'd, somebody'd shot him and, so I don't know, I never saw him no more. And last I heard of him he was at, round Top Moor Farm house, and Mr Len Linley lived on Top Moor Farm and I think he maybe fed him or looked after him a bit. But he disappeared. That's all I know of red deer really.

This piece of moorland is it actually attached, is it just like...

No there's a Moors Top Road in between, between it and, and, yeah between, the arable like. Yeah.

And does, what's it like on either side?

It's just a grown up, there's a Northern Tramway on one, on the north side of it, what we call the Northern Tram, and on the other side there's some land belonging the Lincolnshire Trust, that's birch trees and bracken that they've done very little wi' and then there's another strip, coming south at the side of the Lincolnshire Trust, its belong somebody who was taking peat off up to a few years ago and they stopped and I think they donated the moors to English Nature, and gave the moors to English Nature.

This was not...

But nothing has been done at it.

This was somebody independent of the Moss Litter Company?.

It was somebody independent that owned some moors, same as the bit we have like. They owned, well two strips.

What, what could you have done with that piece of moorland and what have some of the other farmers done with theirs?

That haven't done anything with it. They could have sold it to, maybe at one, I don't think Fisons was ever in the market for buying any, I think they just took to what British Moss had had. But at one time in the early nineteen, oh ten or something like that, I think they was maybe in the market for buying these strips, British Moss. But I don't think they was that keen, if they could lease 'em and just get a lease for getting the peat off, they really wasn't bothered, I don't think, about owning the land like and that's what had happened with a lot of Crowle strips.

And you say you have an agreement or some kind of partnership with English Nature?

We've had a WES Agreement, Wetland Enhancement Scheme, running since, maybe nineteen eighty nine or something like that, maybe not quite as long as that. Anyway it's long while, anyway, been a long while and it's due for renewal now. But, it's all changed now they've gone to Natural England and we have to come under this, higher stewardship scheme instead of these WES Agreements, it comes under, so whether we shall have to carry some of this higher enhancement schemes across into t'farm land, I don't know. We're supposed to be having a meeting to discuss it, but we haven't had any correspondence or any date of any meeting yet so, and it's about a month since I was talking to English Nature and they said it was priority but, I haven't heard anything yet.

You've talked a bit about the deer being a bit of a problem for you on the farm, is there any other way that the moors have affected the farm?

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Not in anyway really. They don't want any water seepage to come into the farm drainage systems, so the moors is getting wetter and if you have a long bout of wet, a wet spell it over spills and makes the land bordering the moors wet. Sometimes you can't get on it 'cause it's too wet while the drainage systems sort of cope with it, after a few days it goes down and you can go on again. But, it's, like a big sponge, but it used to run off regular, and now it gets built up and then seems to come off all in one mad rush like.

Can you just tell me a bit more about what it actually looks like, what's there, what kind of things are there?

Well there's bracken, there's heather, it's populating after clearing the top growth, me and the Lincolnshire Trust have made a lot of open areas and we've gone on with bush hogs and one thing and another, and they've had sheep on and it's spreaded this heather seed and there's quite a lot of new generating heather coming which looks very nice. There's a lot of cotton grass established, complete white blankets of cotton grass. But the main problem is birch, both coppiced after you've cut it down, it coppices thicker than ever and the more you disturb the flora of the moors the more seedlings strike up and it's denser and worse than when you started. So it's an ongoing thing. We've experimented wi' different rates of chemicals to snub birch growth, seedling growth and not touch t'heather. I've finally come up wi' one that's just about the right mixture for doing what we want and not touching other things. There is a few little stunted oak trees growing but it's not really their type of soil. They grow to about ten foot high and look scraggy and sort of never make it any more than that. They don't die, there is quite a lot of Scotch pine growing, but the roe deer and the red deer nibble the bark and they sort of look very sickly and they die off if the nibble right round t'tree. But Linc's Trust, they seem to be against this scotch pine growing and they cut 'em off, chainsaw 'em off, which I'm not, I don't agree with and I think it's, they should let 'em grow, cause they're a nice tree. But they don't seem as though they want 'em and that's about it like.

Does it encourage particular wildlife?

There's very little wildlife actually, there's pheasants and, on t'edges, they don't go in very deep because there isn't any food for 'em. There's a few little birds on edges, there used to be a lot of ducks on Crowle side, on this wet area, but now that's knitted together there in't much water for the ducks. These nightjar they come at the times of the year, when, in open areas, especially what we've cleared and what Linc's Trust cleared. You can go up late at night in dark and you can hear 'em churning and buzzing about like. Some years more than others. This year there's been quite a good population on, last year we never hardly heard one. Me and my wife used to go up and sit and listen, but, not last year cause there wan't many. But this year there's been quite a lot. And there's a lot of geese on them flooded areas on Thorne side, down at, on t'right hand side of that limestone road there's a lot of geese using it for roosting. Going onto these peat banks that's completely surrounded by water where they think they're safe from foxes and that, and they rest up on there. There's quite a lot of flight in there at nights. Ducks as well, a lot o' seagulls makes it their home instead of going back to t'Humber and Ouse and that, they rest up there.

This cessation of taking peat on a commercial basis, largely, on the moors and the plan to restore a bit more of the natural environment, do you think that that will have an effect on you and how do you feel about that?

No I don't think it'll personally have any affect on me, it's a good thing that it'll try to recreate a raised bog mire again, but it's a matter of thousands of years in't it, to get it where it was like, but, it's surprising how quick the low end of ours is regenerated and, well I think it's one of the most

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interesting plots o' land both on Crowle and Thorne Moors. I think if English Nature owned up they would say the same. But, well, when they used to do it with them, cut peat with them machines, you never noticed really that they'd been there, but when they started blitzing it hundreds of acres at a time, with them augers and levelling it all off and that, used to blow like a desert and that sort of what maybe, made people take notice of what was going on like. It couldn't be seen what was going on without you went onto moors to see, because they were just working away from t'edges but...

Did that happen around here?

It didn't happen on Crowle Moors no, but it happened on Thorne in a big way and its happened at Hatfield hasn't it, I've never been on Hatfield Moors not in years and years, but, they were just starting to clear it then ready for this big excavation with these surface milling and what have you.

And has peat extractions finished now then?

As far as I know it's finished on Thorne, they're removing some stacks that's been there for quite a few years, they've been removing them, this summertime they've been removing 'em, stockpiles. But whether they still digging any on Hatfield or not I don't know, I don't think they are. The peat works yard up at Swinefleet was absolutely full of peat at, in summertime that they were leading up wi' t'train from established peat stacks, but I think that's finished now like. I an't been on Thorne Moors for quite a while, we used to do, well, was in there, this summertime I went and did a job for Linc's Trust, a two day job. That's first time I'd been on of a long while. It was all shutting down and growing up, the workings was growing up with onion rush and, well vegetation they maybe didn't want, a lot of small birch was starting to come in, so they'll deal with that lot, without they can flood it and drown it, that might be the best policy on them low milling fields, just to keep t'water level high.

So that, that's, Scotts have, that's, they were the large-scale diggers?

Well Fisons was large scale, Scotts took it over I expect, to know that there was gonna be a good payout at sometime and they just hung to it a bit while this went through and finished it then like you know.

And are there, there are one or two smaller, I don't know how many there are, smaller concerns that still dig some peat aren't there?

There in't anybody that digs peat that I know, not here, the council's stopped this digging at Crowle here, while they see what goes on, I don't know. But there's no, no small producers, Mrs, Mrs Spencer Revitt she was the last nearest to my bit o' moors that was working and that was about it. It was going for animal feed to mix in, to go into a pig ration. They'd got something, they blended it in and it was good for pigs, kept intently it kept pigs from scouring and a few different diseases that they pick up when they're in large numbers, it seemed to work wonders like. I don't know what they're doing with it now.

And did that finish recently?

Oh they'll have been, what will they've been finished Chris? Five or six years.

CI Yeah, somewhere in that region I would think.

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Did you want to go up and have a look at *t'moor*, do you want me to take you up and have a look at that?

If you, if you've got the time to do that I'd be grateful thank you.

I'll take you up there.

Well thank you very much indeed.

[Recording Ends]